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Saṅkhārā (Formations)

A study of the 4th aggregate
by Piya Tan ©2005

1 How formations function in daily life

1.1 Mental formations occur at every moment of our waking lives. A common example will show how formations work. Once one perceives someone as having all the qualities that one is looking for in another, one thinks one has “fallen in love” with that other person. One *thinks* that this person is taken to be the most beautiful and most wonderful person in the world. One *says* wonderful things and *does* all kinds of things to have the attention of this person. All this however is often guided by habitual tendencies (or past conditioning), rooted lust and delusion.

When the affair or marriage fails, one actually *hates* this person or feels the pain of the fallout. In a broken marriage, one party might even sue the other for divorce, and the situation can get very painful and destructive. Many others related to or connected with the feuding couple will be negatively affected, too. In some cases, one might even murder the other. All this is because of wrong perception and unwholesome formations, based on greed, hate and delusion.



Diagram 1. Kanizsa's Triangle

1.2 Formations regard themselves as the “doer,” the busy-body that wants to be in control of the situation. This controller dictates what you *do*, what you *say*, even what you *think*. Indeed, every little action that is consciously done—like turning your head (towards an attractive object), or saying hello, or waking in the middle of the night and feeling lost—is a result of the formations of one kind or another. Understandably, as a result, the formations are often regarded as the self. In reality, like all the other aggregates, formations are only processes. Since they are all impermanent, you do not own them; you are not them; they are not the self or soul.

1.3 The **Kanizsa triangle** is a famous optical illusion that was first described by the Italian psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa in 1955. In this figure we “see” a white equilateral triangle where in

fact there is none. This effect is known as a *subjective* or *illusory* contour. The non-existent white triangle also appears to be brighter than the surrounding area, but really has the same brightness as the background. The Kanizsa triangle is an effective way to show how we perceive things and then go on to construct our own image of them, which is actually not the true picture at all!

2 Language and knowledge

2.1 LANGUAGE TENDS TO REIFY THINGS

2.1.1 Formations play a central role in language and communication in general.¹ Human language, however, is based on the naming process (*nāma*) so that it has a form (*rūpa*) that is understandable and communicable amongst one another. In other words, language tends to create or reify things. *We tend to regard the name as the thing named.*

¹ For a discussion on “speech and action,” see SD 17.4 (6).

Wúmén'guān case 29: The Sixth Patriarch's "Not wind, not flag"

無門關 第二十九 公案 六祖² 之非風非幡

Wú mén'guān dì'èr shí jiǔ gōng'àn liùzǔ zhī fēi fēng fēi fān³

六祖因風颺刹幡，有二僧對論，*Liùzǔ yīn fēng yáng chà fān yǒu èr sēng, duì lùn*

The Sixth Patriarch saw a temple flag⁴ [a streamer] flapping because of the wind. Two monks were arguing.

一云：“幡動。”一云：“風動。”*Yī yún: "fān dòng" yī yún: "fēng dòng."*

One said, "The flag is moving!" The other said, "The wind is moving!"

往復，曾未契理。*Wǎng fù céng wèi qì lǐ*

They argued back and forth, and could not reach a conclusion.

祖云：“不是風動，不是幡動，仁者心動！”*Zǔ yún, bú shì fēng dòng, bú shì fān dòng, rén zhě xīn dòng.*

The Patriarch said, "It's not the wind that is moving; it's not the flag that is moving—it's your mind that is moving!"

二僧悚然。*Èr sēng sǒng rán.*

The two monks were awe-struck.

Wumen's Comment

無門曰：“不是風動，不是幡動，不是心動，甚處見祖師？”

Wú mén yuè, bú shì fēng dòng, bú shì fān dòng, bú shì xīn dòng, shěn chù jiàn zǔshī.

Wumen says: "It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is not the mind that moves. Where do you go to see the patriarch?"

若向者裏見得親切，方知二僧買鐵得金。*Ruò xiàng zhě lǐ jiàn de qīn qiè, fāng zhī èr sēng mǎi tiě de jīn.*

If you see this deeply [If you truly understand this], then you will know that the two monks, buying iron, received gold.

祖師忍俊不禁，一場漏逗。”*Zǔ shī rěn jùn bù jīn, yì cháng lòu dòu.*

The venerable Patriarch could not hold back his mirth, teasing them for a while.”

Wumen's Verse 頌曰 sòng yuè

風幡心動

fēng fān xīn dòng

Wind, flag, and mind are (all) moving:

一狀領過

yì zhuàng lǐng guò

(this is) a case that is simply dismissed.

只知開口

zhǐ zhī kāi kǒu

They only know how to open their mouths,

不覺話墮

bù jué huà duò

unaware of their fault in talking!

2.1.2 On a word and sound level, religion is nothing more than received learning: we are merely a vessel filled up from another vessel, and so on. We are then the proverbial spoon that tastes not the soup, but the soup is cold and lacking nutriment, anyway. We learn the memes⁵ and replicates them thinkingly or unthinkingly. A **mime** is “an element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-gene-

² Orig Chinese text from: <http://homepage1.nifty.com/poem-club/mumonkan/mumonkanwoyomu.htm>. I thank my wife Ratna for assisting me with the pinyin transliteration and translation of the Chinese. For an English tr, see Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*. NY: Weatherhill, 1977:26-137.

³ See also **Taming of the bull**, SD 8.2 (11).

⁴ “Temple flag,” 刹幡 *chà fān*, a streamer, a long narrow flag.

⁵ This is more fully discussed at SD 26.3.

tic means, especially imitation” (OED).⁶ **Hamilton** gives examples of how such a meme (she does not use this term) is passed on socially (through language):

At a ceremonial conferring of a Knighthood, the British sovereign does not just touch the recipient’s shoulder with the point of a sword but also says “I dub thee Sir Knight.” And we do a similar thing at a more commonplace level all the time. When we raise a glass to someone we nearly always say “cheers,” “*salut*,” “it’s good to see you,” to acknowledge that the salutation is being made. When we shake hands, we say “how do you do,” “good morning,” “hello.”

A verbal explanation of a non-verbal symbol acts in a similar way. If we do not understand a mathematical symbol we see on a page a verbal explanation of it “makes real” to us what it represents—and this example indicates that reifying in this sense of making something a real part of one’s experience applies to what is abstract just as much as to what is concrete. (2000:148)

2.1.3 There is a dark side, a shadow, to all this. In a pathological group, community or society, communication is almost only on a language level (that is, through words, body language and symbols), and no deeper. Here, people says and do things mainly to be a part of the group, that is, to seek the approval of others. If there are more than one pathological group, and there usually are in a pathological society, each group will have a private discourse reserved for internal group communication, and a public discourse to maintain harmony of sort. In such a pathological society, social distance⁷ and power distance announce one’s social status, wealth, political power, etc.

2.1.4 As Buddhism gains wider acceptance and popularity, it quickly attracts the entrepreneurs, the social elite and aspirants to social elitehood. Buddhism becomes a status symbol, and Buddhists becomes commodities and statistics. The notion of karma might also be misconstrued to favour the elite and the successful, since, obviously, their current status *must* have been the result of their past good karma. Status, structures, power and money then define Buddhism. In such a situation, form, numbers and wealth become more important than substance, spirit and succour. Social work, despite its vital potential for people-helping—is used to give one a respectable social face or front, but often at the cost of moral values and the spiritual life. The point is that one should not merely *show* that one is a Buddhist—indeed, one need not even show that one *is* a Buddhist—but that one cultivates moral virtues for the sake of mindfulness that seeks liberating wisdom.

2.1.5 There are today two kinds of world religions: the word-based and the truth-based. The classic example of a word-based teaching is the opening of John’s Gospel in the Bible: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). In a truth-based teaching, words, language, even truth itself, are only the *means* to an end, and that end is spiritual awakening. It is in this spirit, that in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), the Buddha declares,

Bhikshus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Dharma, how much more that which is not Dharma!⁸ (M 22,14/1:135), SD 3.13

Letting go of the word-based and thought-based virtual truth, one directly sees the wordless and thought-free true reality here and now.⁹

⁶ See eg Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 1999.

⁷ See eg Geertz Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill, 1991. See also http://www.international-business-center.com/international_newsletter/april_2003/april_03_web.htm#article.

⁸ *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag’eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean “good states,” ie calm and insight (*samatha, vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikôpama S** (M 66.26-33/1:455) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Taṇhāsaṅkhaya S** (M 38.14/1:260 f @ SD 7.10) as one of the abandonment of attachment to insight. Bodhi, however, is of the view that “*dhamma* here signifies not good states themselves, but the teachings, the correct attitude to which was delineated just above in the simile of the snake.” (M:ÑB 1209 n255). See SD 3.13 Intro.

⁹ See **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65/1:188-193), SD 35.4(3a(4)3).

2.2 RITUAL AND SUPERSTITION

2.2.1 Language and action are powerfully combined in ritual performances. The power of rituals is simply their ability to make one perceive the word as the thing. A brahminical priest or a Tantric shaman makes physical gestures during a ritual, makes offerings and muttering chants: all this, to the believer, has the power to bring about the desired result of the ritual.¹⁰

Religious rituals are often merely perceived solutions with a catch, and the only benefactor is the ritual performer. They appear to work because they are often based on *superstition*, that is, the irrational and unjustified belief in the supernatural, that one's actions and lives are controlled by external agencies, often with which one could negotiate (eg not walking under a ladder) or appease (eg offering religious sacrifices). Superstition tends to be strong in those who lack self-knowledge and spiritual strength, causing then to surrender self-effort and wisdom to external agencies.

2.2.2 The language of faith-centred religion is generally and essentially a language of fiction: they do not stand the test of scrutiny and personal experience. What does it mean, for example, when someone claims that "God created the world"? It is not a self-evident fact and needs to be "explained" by some authority figure or from a "top-down" communication process. It can never be a common search for and examination of true reality as there are already biases, assumptions and a closed mind.¹¹

Not all rituals are bad, of course. A Buddhist gathering usually starts with a puja when the salutation (*Namo tassa...*), the 3 refuges and the 5 precepts are recited together. This not only reminds one of one's practice, but also helps boost spiritual fellowship. However, when one chants mantra into a Buddha pendant, thinking it would make one bulletproof, it is superstition.

In other words, meaningful rituals may be beneficial in bringing one mental peace or boost fellowship and wholesome thoughts, but they become harmful when one becomes superstitious about them. For example, a salesman might think that he makes good sales when he is wearing a certain shirt, but this way of thinking can also hinder his progress if, say, he loses his shirt or he damages it. Similarly, a superstitious fear of Friday the 13th may raise one's level of anxiety.

2.2.3 Most, if not all, of our superstitions are learned as children. Young people tend to be superstitious because of their ignorance and their sense of uncertainty and vulnerability. However, as we mature, we usually forget our superstitions or outgrow them. Those who are dominated by lustful greed or by hate, tend to be anxious and restless, and as such are more likely to remain superstitious. There is a greater propensity for superstition amongst women than men (one often finds horoscope forecasts in women's magazine, but rarely in men's magazines). This propensity is stronger where women feel that they have less control over their lives than men do.

2.2.4 The locus of control is also a major contributing factor as to whether one is superstitious or not.¹² If you have an internal locus of control, you feel confident that you are in charge of your life and in control of the situation. If you have an external locus of control, you lack confidence about yourself and believe that things *happen* to you. People with an external locus of control are more likely to be superstitious as a way of getting more control over their lives.

Superstition then plays a negative role in our lives, especially when the situation is compounded by a bad habit such as gambling. Compulsive gamblers are classic example of those who tend to be very superstitious, especially since they have high expectations in being lucky. Gamblers, being obsessed by chance and luck, can come to a point where they lose all control of their lives.

¹⁰ See Hamilton 2000:148.

¹¹ There is a campus joke about this (here is one version of it): a philosopher is like myopic looking for a non-existent black cat in a dark room. A theologian, on the other hand, is like a blind man in the same dark room who claims he has found that non-existent cat! And a lawyer is one who smuggles in a cat in his coat, and then emerges from the room triumphantly showing off the cat!

¹² HM Lefcourt, *Locus of control: Current trends in theory and research*. Potomac, MD: Erlbaum, 1976 & SA Vyse, *Believing in magic. The psychology of superstition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

3 How do we know things?

3.1 Superstition, as we have seen [2.2], often arises from ignorance and craving. As such, an understanding of the nature of knowledge should help. Firstly, how does knowledge arise? The simplest answer is found in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23): knowledge arises at the six sense-doors [6.3]. However, these sense-doors are not data-sensors, but are filters and interpreters. We only see what we want to see, and hear only what we want to hear; yet our eyes blind us, our ears deafen us, and we are not exactly in control of our actions and thoughts. They seem to have a life of their own propelled by our past and habitual tendencies.

On a more wholesome level, if we make an effort to keep an open mind and learn, then we have a better chance to go beyond the autopilot of habitual tendencies. There are three ways we can learn things.¹³ The most common way we can gather knowledge is through **listening** (*suta, mayā paññā*). This is also the most common way of teaching in ancient India so that the learned is said to be “well-heard” (*bahu-s, suta*). This way of learning is based on a direct teacher-pupil interaction and not just book learning. Buddhist studies without meditation would fall into this category. Religious teachers, however, should not only bring wisdom to their students, but also instill character into them. This is much more than can be said of being *well-read*, which would be the modern parallel of one who is “well-heard.” Either way, this can be called “academic knowledge.”

3.2 The second level of learning is that of **thinking** (*cinta, mayā paññā*), when we reflect over what we have heard and begin to fathom deeper into it so that the wisdom becomes more mature. Sometimes, wisdom through thinking arises first in us, especially when we are thoughtful and mindful. This type of knowledge is beneficial insofar as it helps us to examine and refine what we have already known. This self-thought wisdom can be called “philosophical knowledge.”

3.3 The third level of knowledge is the most important: it is that of **mental cultivation** (*bhāvanā, mayā paññā*). This is actually first-hand wisdom since it arises from the calm depth and clear breadth of our own mindfulness. Wisdom through listening is at best second-hand knowledge, for we have received it from another. Wisdom through thinking hovers between second-hand and first-hand wisdom. Our thinking is usually rooted in our latent tendencies¹⁴ and other external influences. There is also a good chance that we could be wrong in our views. If we are still unawakened, this knowledge, not matter how perfect, is still put together by mental constructs (*saṅkhārā*).

The wisdom through mental cultivation is wholesome knowledge in that it is a direct experience of true reality. We see and understands the true nature of existence, that it is impermanence, and as such, not satisfactory. In due course, as our wisdom deepens, we realize the selflessness (*anattā*) of all things, that they are all without an abiding essence. This is the wisdom that liberates us from suffering.¹⁵

4 Saññā and saṅkhārā

4.1 *Saññā* and *saṅkhārā* are closely related in the sense that they both *perceive* things. The etymologies of the two words help throw some light on their differences. *Saññā* derives from *sam* (together, in the sense of *putting* together)¹⁶ + √JÑĀ, “to know,” giving the root sense of “knowing together”; *saṅkhārā* derives from *sam* + √KR, “to do,” with the root sense of doing together.” Their connotations are clear: *saññā* is generally a passive process, while *saṅkhārā*, an active one.

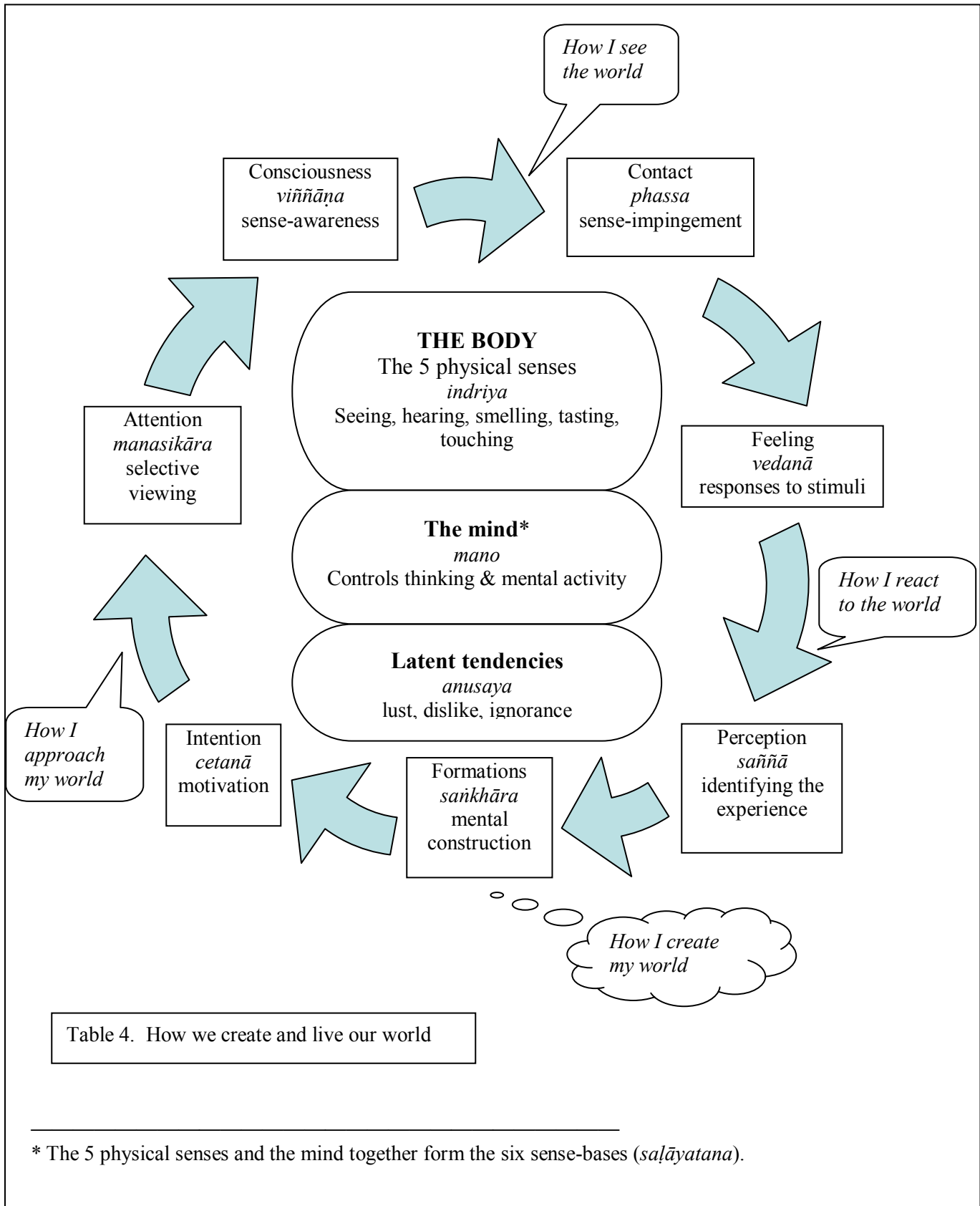
4.2 *Saññā* or perception is the process of putting together one’s bare sense-experiences that *viññāna* (consciousness) has recorded at the sense-doors, along with the attending feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), and then relating them to similar data one has already experienced. Depending on how one reacts to the feelings, the latent tendencies may or may not be reinforced. If one is attracted to the pleasant feel-

¹³ D 3:219; Vbh 324.

¹⁴ See SD 17.4(7.3).

¹⁵ See **Levels of learning**, SD 40a.4 (6.1).

¹⁶ Similar to Latin *con-* (eg “connection”) or *co-* (as in “coincidence”).



ing, *lust* is reinforced; if one shows aversion towards the unpleasant feeling, *hate* is reinforced; if one ignores or is ignorant of the feeling, *ignorance* is reinforced. So one's world is created and reinforced.

4.3 These latent tendencies spring into action at the slightest trigger through unwise attention at the six sense-doors, and the appropriate formations arise through the three karmic doors: the body, speech, and the mind. So one lives one's world. The continuous flow of sense-experiences gives one the impression of permanence, and that there is a self experiencing them. In reality, all the experiences or phenomena simply arise and fall away depending of conditions, internal and external.

4.4 One of the most harmful aspects of formations is its propensity for fabricating ideas and notions even when there is apparently no cause for doing so, but the conditions are there: these conditions are the latent tendencies; and they are always there in the unawakened person. **The Alagaddūpama Sutta** (M 22) gives us some insight into this situation:

“Bhante, can there be anxiety over what is non-existent internally?”

“There can be, bhikshu,” the Blessed One said. “Here, bhikshu, has the view:

‘The world is the self; after death I will be permanent, everlasting, eternal, unchanging in nature, eternally the same, I will endure as long as eternity’—this too he regards thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self.’

He hears the Tathāgata or the Tathāgata's disciple teaching the Dharma for the elimination of all fixations¹⁷ to grounds for views, mindsets, obsessions, inclination and latent tendencies,¹⁸ for the stilling of all formations, for the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, for the fading away (of lust),¹⁹ for the ending (of suffering), for nirvana.

He thinks thus: ‘So I will be annihilated! So I will perish! So I will be no more!’

Then he sorrows, grieves and laments, he weeps beating his breast and become distraught.

That is how there is anxiety regarding what is non-existent internally.”

(M 22,20/1:136 f), SD 3.13

5 Meanings and usages of saṅkhāra

5.1 OVERVIEW. According to British Buddhist scholar, Rupert Gethin,

The *nikāyas* define *saṅkhāras* primarily in terms of will or volition (*cetanā*); they also describe them as putting together (*abhisāṅkharonti*) each of the *khandhas* in turn into something that is put-together (*saṅkhata*).²⁰ In this way *saṅkhāras* are presented as conditioning factors conceived of as active volitional forces. *Cetanā* is, of course, understood as *kamma* on the mental level,²¹ and in the early *abhidhamma* texts all those mental factors that are considered to be specifically skilful (*kusala*) fall within the domain of *saṅkhārakkhandha*.²² Thus it is that the composition of *saṅkhārakkhandha* leads²³ the way in determining whether a particular arising of consciousness constitutes a skilful or an unskillful *kamma*. All this accords well with the *nikāyas*' singling out of *cetanā* as characteristic of the nature of *saṅkhāras*. (Gethin 1985:37)

The formations aggregate is a comprehensive group comprising a number of volitional factors. The *Abhidhamma* lists 50 types of mental formations (or, formations, for short).²⁴ The most important is voli-

¹⁷ *-adhiṭṭhāna-* see foll n.

¹⁸ *Dīṭṭhi-t,ṭhān'ādhiṭṭhāna,pariyuṭṭhān'abhinivesānusaya.*

¹⁹ *Virāga* also “fading away of lust” or “dispassion” (see §21).

²⁰ Eg **Khandha Saṅnyutta** defs, S 3:59 f, 86 f. (Gethin's fn)

²¹ A 3:425. (Gethin's fn)

²² “This is most simply expressed at Dhk 9 where the truth of arising and the truth of the path are said to be *saṅkhārakkhandha*; it is elaborated at Dhs 185-225, and at Vbh 63-69, where the various categories of unskillful *dharmas* are treated in terms of the *khandhas*.” (Gethin's fn)

²³ Cf Vism 14.135. (Gethin's fn)

²⁴ See Vbh §§92-120/40-53. For the 50 types of formations, see Vism 14.131-184/462-472, & for summary, see Vism:Ñ 880 (Table II).

tion (*cetanā*), the mental factor that causes us to act by way of body and speech. Mental formations do not include feeling (which forms a different aggregate) but includes all the different desires and emotions, including the wholesome and unwholesome roots. They are the psychological roots of unwholesome actions (greed, hatred and delusion), and the roots of wholesome actions (charity, lovingkindness and wisdom).

5.2 DERIVATION. The term *saṅkhāra* is resolved as *saṅ* (= con, “together”) + √KR, “to do” → *karoti*, “he does, he makes”; hence, giving the sense of “putting something together.” In fact, it literally means “constructing, construction.”²⁵ The noun has both the active and passive senses: as such, *saṅkhārā* are both the things that deliberately put together, construct and compound other things, and also the things that are put together, constructed and compounded.²⁶

5.3 MEANINGS. Due to its polysemy (multiple meanings), *saṅkhārā* is perhaps the most difficult early Buddhist term. Boisvert (1995:91-112) identifies 5 meanings of *saṅkhārā*: (1) as *saṅkhata*; (2) as *paccaya*; (3) as *āyu,saṅkhāra*; (4) as part of *sa,saṅkhāra* and *asaṅkhāra*, and (5) as a *khandha*. I will use this fivefold scheme (with some rearrangement), adding a sixth category (6), to explain the intricacies of *saṅkhāra*.

These are **the 6 meanings of *saṅkhāra***, that is, (1) as formations, (2) as *paccaya*, (3) as *khandha*, (4) as *āyu.saṅkhāra*, (5) as *sa,saṅkhāra* and *asaṅkhāra*, and (6) as karma:

(1) “Formations” or “conditioned phenomena” (*saṅkhārā*, pl). In the widest sense, *saṅkhārā* comprise all conditioned things (*saṅkhata,dhammā*). Here all the 5 aggregates, not just the 4th, are *saṅkhārā*—as shown in **the Channa Sutta** (S 22.90).²⁷ In other words, it refers to all the universe, but not to nirvana, which is unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). A conditioned phenomenon produces other conditioned phenomena in conjunction with consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and form (*rūpa*). In this narrower sense, it is identical to (5).

(2) **The 2nd factor of dependent arising**, that is, as *paccaya* or *nidāna*. While (1) is the “passive” conditioned state, *saṅkhārā*, as a condition (*paccaya*) or link (*nidāna*) (as well as (5) *khandha*), is the **active** “producing” or “generating” conditioner.²⁸ As the 2nd factor of dependent arising, *saṅkhārā* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence—as such, it is here best rendered as “volitional activities” or “karma-formations” to distinguish them from the passive “formations” discussed in **the Kāma,bhū Sutta 2** (S 41.6).²⁹ This latter set (as formations) is used only in the context of the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling,³⁰ and never used in connection with dependent arising—see usage (6) below. In **the (Pacetana) Ratha,kāra Sutta** (A 3.15), however, we see this meaning applied to *abhisāṅkhāra*, that includes the broader sense of the aggregates (as the karma of the three doors).³¹

(3) ***Saṅkhārā* as the 4th aggregate (*khandha*)** (Vbh 72, 89) is an activity restricted to the mental realm, and refers to both karma as cause (*cetanā*) and as effect (*phala*), as exemplified by the cooking parable: one prepares the ingredients and cooks them (active), but the cooking takes its own effect (passive). Here, *saṅkhārā* is defined as the six classes of volitions (*cha cetanā,kāya*), as in **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56),³² that is, volition in terms of each of the six sense-objects. Here, rendered as “**volitional formations**.” (In the Abhidhamma, *saṅkhāra-k,khandha* refer to all mental concomitants of consciousness apart from feeling and perception.)

²⁵ S 22.79/3:87. See also BDict: *saṅkhāra*.

²⁶ For defs of *saṅkhāra*, see Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, 1996:66-81 (ch 4).

²⁷ S 22.90/3:132 f; see also S 3:87.

²⁸ S 2:5; Vbh 144, 173. See **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.12) n in SD 5.10 (2004).

²⁹ S 41.6/4:293.

³⁰ See **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.42/1:275) n in SD 1.11 (2003a).

³¹ A 3.15/1:110-113 @ SD 17.7. On the term’s usage as “aggregate,” see foll def.

³² S 22.56/3:60 @ SD 3.7.

(4) “Life-formation” (*āyu,saṅkhāra*)³³ is the same as *bhāva,saṅkhāra*, ie as “fuel” to rebirth or the *bhava* link in dependent arising (2). Buddhaghosa, in his Commentary on the **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), explains the Buddha’s overcoming his serious illness at Beluva (D 16.2.23) as a result of his own physical strength and from his attainment of fruition (*phala,samāpatti*). This new strength, derived from the attainment, helps him to both overcome the illness and extend his life. Buddhaghosa goes on to explain that there are two kinds of “life-formation” (*jīvita,saṅkhārā* or *āyu,saṅkhāra*), namely, (1) life itself by which life is propelled on, and (2) the attainment of fruition. The former, acquired at birth, refers to a kind of “life-faculty” (*jīvit’indriya*) which maintains and vitalizes the living physical body, whose quality and length is further determined by past karma, and whose length is determined at birth.³⁴ The latter is nurtured in the current life, and according to Buddhaghosa, it is this latter that is referred to in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (DA 2:547).³⁵

(5) **Sa,saṅkhāra** (with *saṅkhāra*) and **asaṅkhāra** (without *saṅkhāra*) are used in connection with *parinibbāyī*.³⁶ a *sa,saṅkhāra parinibbāyī* is one who attains nirvana “with effort,” who eradicates the mental fetters through striving (Pug 17); an *asaṅkhāra parinibbāyī* is one who attains nirvana “without effort,” such as Bāhiya Dārucīriya who understands the truth instantaneously.³⁷

(6) The 3 kinds of intentional actions or **karma-activities** (or karma-formations), namely, bodily activities (*kāya,saṅkhāra*),³⁸ verbal activities (*vacī,saṅkhāra*)³⁹ and mental activities (*citta,saṅkhāra* or *mano,saṅkhāra*).⁴⁰ In meditation terminology, the first refers to in-and-out breathing (because breath is dependent on the body); the second, initial thought and sustained thought (because by thinking, we form the ideas that we express through language); the third, perception and feeling (because they are dependent on the mind).⁴¹ Two of these—the bodily activity and the mental activity—are also included in the expanded instructions on the breath meditation.⁴²

5.4 SAṅKHĀRĀ AND KARMA. E J Thomas, in *The History of Buddhist Thought*, proposes that this type of *saṅkhārā*, divided into bodily, verbal and mental activities is “probably a simpler and probably earlier analysis of the aggregates”⁴³ [1]. He is referring to the fact that the Abhidhamma tradition classifies *saṅkhāra-k,khandha* into 50 different mental activities, only one of which is volition (eg Dhs 62).

5.5 SAṅKHĀRĀ AND PUÑŪA. On a broader scale, there are 3 **volitional formations** (*abhisāṅkhāra*): meritorious formation (*puññābhisāṅkhāra*), demeritorious formation (*apuññābhisāṅkhāra*) and imperturbable formation (*āneñjābhisāṅkhāra*).⁴⁴ Meritorious formations occur in the sense-sphere and the form sphere; demeritorious formations occur only in the sense-sphere; and the imperturbable formations

³³ D 2:99, 108; A 4:312; Kvu 2:559.

³⁴ Rhys Davids aptly renders the first kind of *jīvit’indriya* as “life till allotted time” (D:RD 2:106; cf Divy 203).

³⁵ See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9. **The Dhanu-g,gaha Sutta** (S 20.6/2:265 f) says that the life-formation runs faster than the speed at which as man could catch a flying arrow. Comy there says that *āyu,saṅkhāra* refers to the physical life-faculty (*rūpa,jīvit’indriya*), but it is impossible to describe the breakup of formless phenomena (ie mental states, because according to the Abhidhamma, they break up 16 times faster than physical states) (SA 2:227).

³⁶ S 5:70; A 1:233.

³⁷ A 1:24; U 1:10; DhA 2:209 ff.

³⁸ M 118.24/3:83.

³⁹ M 118.25/3:84.

⁴⁰ See eg **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 4.13-15/1:301); (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2/2:3), **Bhūmija S** (S 12.25.3/2:39 f); **Kāma,bhū S 2** (S 41.6/4:293).

⁴¹ See **Kāma,bhū S** (S 41.6,5), SD 48.7.

⁴² **Ānāpāna,satī Sutta**, M 118.18 f/3:82 = **Eka,dhamma Sutta**, S 54.1/5:311 f.

⁴³ “They appear to be compiled in order to include every mental phenomenon, and the Dhammasaṅgaṇi makes sure of this by adding ‘and any other non-material things that have arisen causally.’ The Pāli and Sanskrit lists largely agree, but are not identical” (1933:61 n2). Thomas refers to Abhk 2:23; Mvyut 154.

⁴⁴ D 3:217; S 12.51/2:82; Pm 2:206; Vbh 135. The term “merit” (*puñña*) here is buddhicized and has the sense of “fortunate, virtuous, auspicious quality, good” in reference to actions and their results. For a discussion, see Cousins 1996:153-156.

occur in the formless sphere. These three volitional formations are actually identical with the *saṅkhārā* link of dependent arising, where they are rendered as volitional activities.

According to the Dīgha Commentary (DA 3:998), however, the imperturbable formation refers to the will for rebirth in the formless realm, which is the meaning also found in the Abhidhamma (Vbh 135).

According to **the Parivīmaṁsana Sutta** (S 12.51), these three volitional formations are the volitions of an ignorant person (*avijjā'gata purisa, puggala*), and when ignorance is abandoned for wisdom, we will no more create the three volitional formations.⁴⁵

5.6 SAṅKHĀRĀ AND EFFORT. There are also the “**volitional formations of striving**” (*padhāna, saṅkhāra*),⁴⁶ a designation for energy that accomplishes the fourfold function of right striving (*samma-p, padhāna*), applied to the “4 paths to spiritual power” (*iddhi, pāda*): desire or will power, energy, mind, investigation (S 51.13).⁴⁷

5.7 SAṅKHĀRĀ AS FUEL. From the above, it is thus clear that *saṅkhārā* (pl) and *saṅkhāra* (sg)⁴⁸ occur in many different contexts in the Nikāyas, and can be difficult to explain or understand. However, the first three contexts—in the 3 characteristics (*ti, lakkhaṇa*) formula, as the second link of dependent arising (*paṭicca, samuppāda*) and as an aggregate (*saṅkhāra-k, khandha*)—are especially common and important to understand. Although these contexts often overlap, their roles are distinct enough for us to see how they are the “fuel” by which an individual continues in samsara, and how liberation can be won.

6 *Saṅkhārā* in the “3 characteristics” formula

6.1 THE 3 CHARACTERISTICS FORMULA

6.1.1 Meaning of *saṅkhārā*. In its widest sense, *saṅkhārā* (pl)⁴⁹ comprise all conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhata, dhammā*), that is, this whole universe, all its “contents,” and all the principles or laws underpinning them. The word *contents*, or even its simpler synonym, *things*, might give us some false notion of permanence or lasting stability. The point is that whatever exists, must exist in *time*. To exist in time means to be impermanent, to become other. Hence, to exist means to necessarily change. All this should be understood by the term *saṅkhāra* or its anglicized form “samskara” or its translation “**formations.**”

6.1.2 The extent of *saṅkhārā*. Here, all the 5 aggregates, not just the 4th, are *saṅkhārā*—as shown in **the Channa Sutta** (S 22.90).⁵⁰ A conditioned being produces and experiences conditioned phenomena in conjunction with consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and form (*rūpa*). This narrower sense is identical to *saṅkhārā* (1) above [5.3]. The adjective “conditioned” (*saṅkhata*) means subject to being a part of a network of causes and effects, not having a reality of its own.

6.1.3 Nirvana is *neither a formation nor a dharma*

6.1.3.1 Here, however, *saṅkhāra* has a much broader sense: it refers to all the universe, but *not* to nirvana, which is unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). This important sense should be teased out from these **Dhamma, pada** verses, where the terms *saṅkhārā* and *dhammā* appear:

*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ti
yadā paññāya passati
atha nibbindati dukkhe
esa maggo visuddhiyā*

All conditioned things are impermanent:
who sees thus with wisdom,
is revulsed at suffering—
this is the path to purity. Dh 277

*Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā ti
yadā paññāya passati
atha nibbindati dukkhe
esa maggo visuddhiyā*

All conditioned things are unsatisfactory [suffering]:
who sees thus with wisdom,
is revulsed at suffering—
this is the path to purity. Dh 278

⁴⁵ S 12.51/2:80-84 @ SD 11.5. See Hamilton 1996a:74 f.

⁴⁶ Bodhi’s term see S:B 44-47 & 727 n7 (Abhidhamma aspects).

⁴⁷ **Chanda Samādhi S** (S 51.13/5:268).

⁴⁸ On *saṅkhāra* (sg), see SD 40a.9 (2.4.4).

⁴⁹ On the sg form, *saṅkhāra*, see **Cūḷa Vedalla S**, SD 40a.9 (2.4).

⁵⁰ S 22.90/3:132 f; see also S 3:87.

*Sabbe dhammā anattā ti
yadā paññāya passati
atha nibbindati dukkhe
esa maggo visuddhiyā*

All things are non-self:
who sees thus with wisdom,
is revulsed at suffering—
this is the path to purity.

Dh 279

6.1.3.2 In **Dh 227+228**, we have the key word, *saṅkhārā*, “formations,” which refers to all conditioned things, that is, all life and the whole universe: they are *impermanent* (Dh 227), they are *unsatisfactory* (Dh 228). This is where we can also say, “Every *thing* in this universe is impermanent, and whatever is impermanent is unsatisfactory,” as elaborated in such discourses as **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa** (S 22.59).⁵¹

Dh 229 needs closer scrutiny, especially the last line, where some of the best scholars, even Buddhist ones, have misunderstood its subtle but fundamental implication. They misinterpret *dhammā* here is embracing “all states,” that is, the conditioned (*saṅkhata*) and the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), namely, nirvana.⁵² In other words, “nirvana is free from a permanent soul,” that is, non-self.⁵³ This is incorrect, as we shall see.

6.1.3.3 The truth is that *sabbe dhammā* refers to all things, states or phenomena and all principles underlying them, and they are non-self: *everything* is non-self. In other words, there is no abiding self or eternal essence of any kind to be found whether in the 5 aggregates as a whole or in part, neither within nor without them. Nirvana, although spoken as being “unconditioned” (*asaṅkhata*) in linguistic terms, is not included in the word “everything.” Since nirvana is also not a “thing,” it is also not included in “everything.”⁵⁴

6.1.3.4 On a deeper Dharma level, to say that there *is* a self, soul or abiding entity is to fall into the view of eternalism (*sassata, diṭṭhi*), and to say that there is *no* self, soul or abiding entity is to uphold the view of annihilationism (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*). The middle way rejects both: nirvana cannot be referred to as existing (then it would be impermanent) nor non-existing. It is unconditioned, like when a fire that has gone out, has really not gone anywhere.⁵⁵

6.1.3.5 The fact is that nowhere in the suttas is nirvana ever stated as being “non-self.” It is also very clear from such discourses as **the Mahā Māluṅkyāputta Sutta** (M 64), we need to let go of whatever that is tinged by the 3 characteristics for something higher, that is, nirvana, thus:

Whatever that is therein that consists of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness, he regards those states as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as non-self.⁵⁶ He turns his mind away from these states.⁵⁷

⁵¹ S 22.59/3:66-68 ≈ Mv 1.6.38-47 @ V 1:13 f @ SD 1.2.

⁵² I B Horner, in her Majjhima tr of the **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35), eg, notes: “*dhammā*. These include, beside the *saṅkhārā* (conditioned things), the unconditioned nibbāna as well.” (M:H 1:281). See foll n.

⁵³ Narada Thera in Dh:N 4th ed 1993: 225 (*italics added*). A similar idea was held by W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed, 1967:57 f. Both were Sinhala scholar monks.

⁵⁴ It should be noted too that in early Buddhism, there is no distinction between what is English is spoken of as “everything” and “every thing.” However, for convenience, we can take *sabbe saṅkhārā* as referring to “all things” (is conditioned states) and *sabbe dhammā* as referring to “everything.” However, taking these pairs as synonyms respectively (which they are not) gave rise to the confusion of including nirvana in “everything.” We need to think in Pali here, as it were!

⁵⁵ See the fire parable in Vaccha,gotta S (M 72,18 f/1:487), SD 6.15.

⁵⁶ “Impermanent... non-self,” *aniccato dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato parato palokato suññato anattato*: as at M 1:500; A 4:422 f; cf A 2:128. Comy says that the marks of suffering are sixfold (*dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato*), the impermanent twofold (*aniccato palokato*), the non-self threefold (*parato suññato anattato*) (MA 3:146). This refrain (and the rest) shows the attainment of calm (*samatha*), leading to the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*), or “insight preceded by calm” (*samatha, pubbaṅgamā vipassanā*), ie, on emerging from dhyana, one contemplates on it as an object of insight, reflecting it as having arisen through conditions, esp volition: see **Aṭṭhaka,nagara S** (M 52.4/1:350), SD 41.2, where Comy says that this is *samatha, pubbaṅgamā vi-*

Having turned his mind away from these states,⁵⁸ he directs his mind to the death-free element, thus:

“This is peaceful, this is sublime,⁵⁹ that is, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all birth-basis,⁶⁰ the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nirvana.”⁶¹

(M 64,9/1:435 f), SD 21.10

Note that all the 3 characteristics are listed in the first sentence, with its 11 adjectives (“impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as non-self”): 6 of these refer to impermanence, 2 to unsatisfactoriness, and 3 to non-self. Turning away from these states, the practitioner directs his mind to the “death-free element,” that is, nirvana, which is then explained as “the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all birth-basis, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nirvana.” The term “non-self” is not found here at all.⁶²

6.1.4 To exist is to change. All samsaric existence, that is, all life and the universe itself, are conditioned: all that exist are part of a dynamic network of incessant and fluctuating networks of causes and effects. By the very fact that they are conditioned, they are *impermanent*. Indeed, whatever that exists is impermanent: *existence itself is impermanence*. Whatever exists, exists in change: existence is change.

Whatever does *not* change, or more correctly, *conceived* so, does not exist. For meaning only exists in change: to consider anything as impermanent or unchanging is making a meaningless statement. The world or the universe, in other words, if it any cause at all, does not arise from a single cause. As the 4th-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, **Vasubandhu**, puts it:⁶³

If the world had a single cause, whether that single cause be God or something else, the entire universe would have to arise all at once.

[Theist:] But what we observe is that beings occur one after another. Now that fact could be a function of God’s intending for each individual that it arises at a given time and disappears later.

[Reply:] But in that case, since there are numerous intentions, it would turn out that the cause of the world is manifold. Moreover, that plurality of intentions would be simultaneous, for the reason that god, which is their source, putatively has no internal divisions.

(Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣyam 2.64d.1; 1975:101 f; see Abhk:Pr 306)

6.2 SAṄKHĀRA AND DHAMMA

6.2.1 Meaning of dhamma. At this point, it is useful to look at the central Pāli term, *dhamma* (Skt *dharma*). **Bodhi**, in the General Introduction to his Saṃyutta translation, says that, like K R Norman, he uses a “pragmatic approach of using different renderings intended to match its different applications”⁶⁴ gives the following usage of *dhamma*, which are summarized here:⁶⁵

passanā; see **(Yuganaddha) Paṭipadā S** (A 4.170/2:157), SD 41.5. In **Kūṭa,danta S** (M 74), this formula is applied to the body, so that we are not attached to it (M 74.9/1:499), SD 16.1.

⁵⁷ Comy: “He turns his mind away” (*cittam paṭivāpeti*) from the 5 aggregates included in the dhyana, which he has seen to be marked with the 3 characteristics (of impermanence, suffering, non-self) (MA 3:146). He goes on to regard the dhyana or attainment, thus: “This is peaceful...nirvana” (see below).

⁵⁸ Comy: That is, from the 5 aggregates, all of which are marked by the 3 characteristics. (MA 3:146)

⁵⁹ *Paṇītam*, as at M 2:235, 263; A 4:423, 5:8, 110, 320, 322, 354 ff.

⁶⁰ See SD 28.11 (3.2).

⁶¹ *Etam santam etam paṇītam yad idam sabba,saṅkhāra,samatho sabbūpadhi,paṭinissaggo taṅha-k,khayo virāgo nirodho nibbānan ti*, as at M 1:136.

⁶² See esp **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285), SD 26.8.

⁶³ This tr is from Richard P Hayes, “Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition, <http://www.unm.edu/~rhayes/atheism.pdf>, 1991:5, slightly ed.

⁶⁴ K R Norman takes a similar approach to his tr of *dhamma* in Tha: see his discussion at Tha:N 1/118 n to 1.

⁶⁵ Summarized mostly from S:B 42-44; see also index for other refs. For a detailed discussion, see J R Carter 1978 & F WATANABE 1983 ch 2.

<i>Buddha Dhamma</i>	the Buddha's <u>teaching</u>	(S 6.2/1:138-140) = A 2:20
<i>Dhamma,rājā</i>	the king of <u>righteousness</u>	(S 4:303)
<i>dhamma</i> , often <i>dhammā</i> (pl)	<u>things</u>	(S 3:225,9 f)
<i>dhamma</i> (trait of character)	<u>quality</u>	(S 2:204,3-4)
<i>dhammā</i> (4 th <i>satipaṭṭhāna</i>)	<u>phenomena</u> , mind-objects	(S 5:324 f, 5:329 f)
<i>iminā dhammena</i>	by this <u>principle</u>	(S 2:58,3-4; 4:328,21-22)
<i>paṭicca,samuppannā dhammā</i>	dependently arisen <u>phenomena</u>	(S 2:26,7)
<i>loke loka,dhamma</i>	a world- <u>phenomenon</u> in the world*	(S 3:139,22 f)
<i>kusalākusalā dhammā</i>	wholesome & unwholesome <u>states</u>	(S 5:9,17-27)
<i>dhamma,vicaya,sambojjhaṅga</i>	the awakening-factor of discrimination of <u>states</u> *	(S 5:331 f)
<i>dhamm'āyatana</i> ⁶⁶	<u>mental phenomena</u>	(S 2:72)
<i>dhamma,dhātu</i> ⁶⁷	<u>element of Dhamma</u> *	(S 2:56)
<i>-dhamma</i> (eg in <i>khaya</i> ,~)	<u>is subject to</u>	(S 2:26,9 f)
<i>-dhamma</i> (<i>anicca</i> ,~ etc)	<u>nature</u> (of impermanent nature)	(S 3:195 f)

In a few cases (marked by an asterisk), I have my own preferences, namely:

<i>loke loka,dhamma</i>	a worldly <u>condition</u> in the world
<i>dhamma,vicaya,sambojjhaṅga</i>	the awakening-factor of <u>dharm</u> a-investigation
<i>dhamm'āyatana</i>	<u>mental phenomena</u>
<i>dhammā,dhātu</i>	<u>dharm</u> a-element

6.2.2 Meaning of “all things.” The Dhammapada Commentary glosses “all things” (*sabbe dhammā*) of Dh 279a simply as “only the five aggregates are intended” (*pañca-k,khandhā eva adhippetā*) without any elaboration. Such texts as **the (Dve) Khandhā Sutta** (S 22.48) show that when *only* “the five aggregates” are mentioned, it refers to both the aggregates “of clinging” (*upādāna*) and those that are not, that is, the aggregates of the arhats.⁶⁸

This means that *dhammā* here refers to both conditioned things (*saṅkhata,dhamma* = *saṅkhārā*) as well as to unconditioned things (*asaṅkhata,dhamma*), except nirvana. They are not attributed with being impermanent or being suffering, which are only the special characteristics of conditioned things, that is, the whole of samsara. Nirvana (*nibbāna*), however, is not included here, since, strictly speaking, it has not real attributes, and cannot be predicated in any meaningful way. Nirvana is neither a conceptual nor linguistic category. If it is given attributes or predicated, it is *not* nirvana: we are only trying to speak *about* it. The word are not the thing.⁶⁹

Some hint of this can be teased out from how the nun Vajirā describes “a being (*satta*) [as] a mere heap of conditioned states” (*satto...suddha,saṅkhāra,puñja*), as found in **the Vajirā Sutta**,

553	<i>Kin nu satto ti paccesi māra,diṭṭhi,gataṃ nu te suddha,saṅkhāra,puñjo yaṃ na-y-idha satt'upalabbhati</i>	What “being” is there that you assume? How you have fallen into views, Māra! It is a <u>mere heap of conditioned states</u> : Here no being is to be found.
554	<i>Yathā hi aṅga,sambhārā</i>	Just as with parts assembled together

⁶⁶ Bodhi: “As a sense base and element, the *dhammāyatana* and *dhammadhātu* are the counterparts of the *man'āyatana*, the mind base, and the *manoviññāṇadhātu*, the mind-consciousness element. The appropriate sense here would be that of ideas and mental images, but the commentaries understand *dhammas* in these context to include not only the objects of consciousness but its concomitants as well. Thus I translate it ‘mental phenomena,’ which is wide enough to encompass both these aspects of experience.” (S:B 44)

⁶⁷ See prec n.

⁶⁸ S 22.48/3:47 f @ SD 17.1a.

⁶⁹ See SD 17.4 (4).

	<i>hoti saddo ratho ti evam khandham santesu hoti satto ti sammuti</i>	We have the word “chariot,” Even so when there are the aggregates, There is the convention of a “being.”
555	<i>Dukkham eva hi sambhoti dukkham tiṭṭhati veti ca nāññatra dukkhā sambhoti nāññam dukkhā nirujjhati.</i>	Only suffering comes into being; only suffering that stands and ends. Other than suffering, nothing comes to be; other than suffering, nothing ceases. (S 553-555/5.10/1:135)

As such, here, the term *saṅkhārā* means something conditioned, constructed, or formed, that is, samsaric phenomena.⁷⁰ *Saṅkhārā* then does not include nirvana.

6.2.3 Meaning of dhamma. The saying, “all things are non-self” (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), as such, refers to the *all*,⁷¹ that is, whatever is conditioned, and but *not* nirvana (which is the only unconditioned “dharma” in Abhidhamma terms). It is only in the full understanding of what the former—conditioned things—really are that begins to turn our minds towards the unconditioned. But there is one more step, as it were, that is, having fully understood the true nature of the conditioned, we then truly let them go. This total letting-go is nirvana.

6.2.4 Non-ownership. The perception of letting go of conditioned things can also be a spiritual exercise, which works on the basis of the non-ownership (*na tumhāka*) of them. In fact, there are at least 5 suttas called **the Na Tumhāka Sutta**, namely:⁷²

(Kāya)	Na Tumhāka Sutta	The body is not yours	S 12.37/2:64 f.
(Khandha)	Na Tumhāka Sutta 1	The aggregates are not yours	S 22.33/3:33 f (with simile).
(Khandha)	Na Tumhāka Sutta 2	The aggregates are not yours	S 22.34/3:34.
(Dhātu)	Na Tumhāka Sutta 1	The elements are not yours	S 35.101/4:81 f.
(Dhātu)	Na Tumhāka Sutta 2	The elements are not yours	S 35.102/4:82 (same as 1).

The text of these suttas is also found in **the Alagaddūpama Sutta** (M 22), attesting to its importance, thus:

Therefore, bhikshus, give up [let go of] what is not yours.⁷³ When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

What is it that is not yours?

Form is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Feeling is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Perception is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Formations are not yours. Give them up.

When you have given them up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Consciousness is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.⁷⁴

(M 22,40/1:140 f), SD 3.13

⁷⁰ See S:B 44-47.

⁷¹ See esp **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15), SD 7.1.

⁷² In all these 5 suttas, the word *dīgha, rattam* is omitted in the closing stock phrase.

⁷³ Comy: It is the *attachment* or desire (*chanda, rāga*) to the five aggregates, not the aggregates in themselves, that should be given up: they “cannot be torn apart or pulled out.” I have rendered *yam* as “what” (which has a general sense) rather than as “whatever” which connotes that there are certain things that we do “own,” which would go against the teaching of *anattā*.

⁷⁴ Comy: Only an aggregate (form, etc) is the basis for the wrong concept of a self, since apart from them there is nothing else to crave for.

6.2.5 Nothing is worth clinging to. The Pacalā Sutta (A 7.58), where the Buddha teaches Moggallāna how to overcome drowsiness during meditation, closes with this famous passage known as “the brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving.” This whole section is also found in **the Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37).⁷⁵ Sections 11.1+2 are also found in **the Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2** (A 35.80).⁷⁶ It runs thus:

11.1 When this was said, the venerable Mahā Moggallāna said this to the Blessed One:

“In what way, bhante, in brief, is a monk liberated through the destruction of craving, that is, one who has reached total⁷⁷ perfection, the total security from bondage, the total holy life, the total consummation, the highest amongst gods and humans?”⁷⁸

11.2 ⁷⁹“Here, Moggallāna, the monk has learned⁸⁰ that nothing is worth clinging to.⁸¹ And, Moggallāna, a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: he directly knows⁸² all things [he directly knows the nature of the all].⁸³ Having directly known the nature of all things, he fully understands⁸⁴ all things.

11.3 Having fully understood all things, he knows whatever feelings there are, whether pleasant, painful or neither painful nor pleasant.

⁷⁵ M 37.2-3/1:251.

⁷⁶ A 35.80.6/4:88,11-15. Their ensuing passages, however, are different. See SD 3.13 (5).

⁷⁷ “Total,” *accanta*, also “absolute.”

⁷⁸ In **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37.15/1:255 f), Sakra, the leader of the gods, on the instigation of Moggallāna, asks the same question and the Buddha’s answer is identical to the passage here. It is possible that this passage originally belongs to the Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S, but is added here by the Ānguttara Reciters for a more complete Sutta. Requests for brief instructions are found elsewhere in the Canon, eg V 1:39 (Sāriputta to Assaji); S 22.1/3:1-5 (Nakula,pitā to the Buddha).

⁷⁹ This passage [11b] is also found in **Avijjā Pahāna S 2** (A 35/80). The ensuing passages, however, are different. See (5) above.

⁸⁰ “Has learned,” *suta*, lit “has heard.”

⁸¹ “Nothing is worth clinging to,” *sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*, lit “all things are not worthy of adhering to.” “All things” here refer to the 5 aggregates, the 12 sense-bases and the 18 elements, all of which are not fit to be clung to. These factors have to do with insight (*vipassanā*). (AA 4:43)

⁸² “He directly knows,” *abhijānāti*, here meaning to know for oneself by insight, ie through higher self-knowledge, or *abhiññā*. Traditionally, there are 6 “higher powers” or **superknowledges** (*abhiññā*): (1) psychic powers (*iddhi,vidhā*), (2) the “divine ear” or clairaudience (*dibba,sota*), (3) mind-reading, ie the ability to read the thoughts of others (*parassa ceto,pariya,ñāna*), (4) the recollection of one’s own past lives (*pubbe,nivāsānussati*), (5) the “divine eye” (*dibba,cakkhu*), ie the knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings, faring according to their karma, and (6) the destruction of mental cankers (*āsava-k,khaya*), ie arhathood. Nos 4-6 are known as “the three knowledges (*te,vijjā*)” (D 3:281; A 3:280). Comy says that this knowledge here refers to *ñāta,pariññā* (A 4:43): see foll n.

⁸³ “He directly knows all things,” *so sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhijānāti*, alt tr, “he directly knows the nature of the all.” Here the “all” (*sabba*) refers to the 6 senses and their respective sense-objects (**Sabba S**, S 35.23/4:15 @ SD 7.1).

⁸⁴ “He fully understands,” *parijānāti*, meaning “he comprehends, knows fully for certain.” This spiritual knowledge is called “**full understanding**” (*pariññā*), of which there are 3 kinds: (1) Full understanding of the known (*ñāta,pariññā*), ie the discernment of the specific characteristics of a phenomena (“Form as the characteristic of being oppressed’ feeling has the characteristic of being felt, etc”); (2) Full understanding by investigating (*tīraṇa,-pariññā*), ie insight wisdom (*vipassanā,paññā*) which as the 3 universal characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self) as its objects, and which arises when attributing a universal characteristic to a physical and mental state, eg “Form is impermanent; feeling is impermanent, etc”; (3) Full understanding as overcoming (or abandoning) (*pahāna,pariññā*), ie the insight-wisdom that has the universal characteristics as its objects, and arises after one has overcome the idea of permanence, etc”. (Nm 52; Vism 20.3/606 f). Comy says that “full understanding” here refers to *tīraṇa,pariññā* (AA 4:43). The contemplation of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), etc, are given in the final tetrad (*Dhammānupassanā*, contemplation of mind-objects) of the breath meditation of the **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,21/3:83).

As regards to those feelings, he dwells contemplating impermanence in them; he dwells contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them; he dwells contemplating ending (of suffering) in them; he dwells contemplating letting go (of defilements).⁸⁵

When he dwells contemplating impermanence in them, contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them, contemplating ending (of suffering) in them, contemplating letting go (of defilements), he does not cling to anything in the world; not clinging, he is not agitated; being not agitated, he attains nirvana for himself.

He understands. ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more for this state of being.’⁸⁶

That, Moggallāna, is, in brief, how a monk is liberated through the destruction of craving, that is, one who has reached total⁸⁷ perfection, the total security from bondage, the total holy life, the total consummation, the highest amongst gods and humans.” (A 35.80,11/4:87 f), SD 4.11

7 Saṅkhārā in the dependent arising formula

7.1 THE SECOND LINK IN DEPENDENT ARISING. In the dependent arising formula, *saṅkhārā* appears as the second link; in other words, as a condition or connection (*paccaya* or *nidāna*).⁸⁸ While *saṅkhārā* as a characteristic (*lakkhana*) are a “passive” conditioned state, *saṅkhārā* as a condition (*paccaya*) or link (*nidāna*)—together with sense (5), that is, “effort”) [5.3]—are active “producing” or “generating” conditioners.⁸⁹

As the second factor of dependent arising, *saṅkhārā* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence. Here, *saṅkhārā* is synonymous with *kamma*, both of which are derived from the root √KR, “to do” (*karo-ti*). As such, they are here best rendered as “**volitional activities**” or “karma-formations,” as in **the Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta** (M 120), where it is said that a bhikshu (or any practitioner) who has faith, moral virtue, learning, charity and wisdom, can set his mind to a happy birth, such as birth into a wealthy family, a god or a brahma, that is, if he were to “often cultivate” (*bhāvitā bahulī, katā*), the determination (*saṅkhāra*) towards the desired destiny.⁹⁰

There is of course the likelihood that this passage is taken too simplistically to mean that one could simply wish where one wants to be reborn. The real point here is that if one keeps thinking of something, one becomes somehow *becomes* it.⁹¹ On some reflection, one could say that the Buddha is making an ironic statement for the benefit of those who are still reluctant to work towards liberation in this life. All the 31 forms of birth are a still a part of samsara, and as such are not liberation at all. Only the last determination, that of awakening in this life, frees one from suffering. (M 120.37/3:103). As Hamilton aptly points out: “So while the *Sutta* does serve to illustrate that specific mental inclinations can produce specific results, the message of the *Sutta* is, rather a warning of the binding power of volitions.”⁹²

7.2 FORMATIONS AND INCLINATION. Let us examine this not so well known, but important, term, *nati*, meaning “inclination” or habitual tendencies. It is close to the post-canonical term, “habitual karma” (*āciññā, kamma*).⁹³ A couple of interesting passages will clarify the situation. In **the Dvedha, vitakka Sutta** (M 19), the Buddha says:

⁸⁵ The monk effects the abandoning of the mental hindrances by the contemplations of impermanence (*anicānupassanā*), fading away (of lust) (*viragānupassanā*), cessation (of suffering) (*nirodhānupassanā*) and of letting go (of defilements) (*paṭinissaggānupassanā*), and thus comes to look upon feelings (all experiences) with equanimity.

⁸⁶ This para describing the arhat is stock: V 1:14; D 1:84; M 2:39; S 2:82.

⁸⁷ “Total,” *accanta*, also “absolute.”

⁸⁸ On dependent arising, see SD 5.16.

⁸⁹ S 2:5; Vbh 144, 173. See (**Paṭicca, samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.12) n in SD 5.10 (2004).

⁹⁰ M 120/3:100-103 @ SD 3.4.

⁹¹ Cf **Itṭha S** (A 5.43/47-49), where the Buddha declares, “I do not teach that they [rebirth in heaven, etc] are to be obtained through prayer (*āyācana, hetu*) or through wishing (*patthāna, hetu*): see SD 5.7 (4).

⁹² Hamilton 1996a:75 f, emphasis added.

⁹³ Vism 601; Abhs:SR 144.

Bhikshus, whatever a monk often thinks about and ponders upon, that will become his mental inclination (*nati*). (M 19.6/1:115)

This teaching is elaborated in **the Cetanā Sutta 3** (S 12.40), where the Buddha says:

Bhikshus, what one intends, and what one plans, and whatever lies latent in one: this becomes a basis (*ārammaṇa*) for the maintenance of consciousness. When consciousness is established and has developed, there is inclination (*nati*). When there is inclination there is coming and going (*āgati, gati*).⁹⁴ When there is coming and going, there is passing away and being reborn. (S 12.40/2:67), SD SD 7.6c

Here, the Commentary glosses *nati* as craving (*taṇhā*) (SA 2:72). **The Channa Sutta** (S 35.87) goes on to speak of the benefits of letting go of inclinations:

There is wavering in one who is dependent.
 There is no wavering in one who is independent.
 When there is no wavering, there is tranquillity.
 When there is tranquillity, there is no inclination.
 When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going.
 When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and reappearing.
 When there is no passing away and reappearing, there is no here nor beyond nor in between.
 This is the end of suffering. (S 35.87/4:59 = M 144), SD 11.12

In all these passages, we see *saṅkhārā* functioning as inclination (*nati*), that is effectively a synonym for habitual tendencies reinforcing the latent tendencies. All this conduces to suffering and rebirth.

7.3 SYNTHESIS. This kind of *saṅkhārā* (as a link in the dependent arising formula) gives an active synthetical explanation of how an individual existence arises, while as an aggregate (*khandha*), they apply in a passive analytical way. This name will distinguish them from the passive “formations” discussed in **the Kāma, bhū Sutta 2** (S 41.6).⁹⁵ This latter set—as passive “formations”—is used only in the context of the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling,⁹⁶ and never used in connection with dependent arising.⁹⁷

The (Paṭicca, samuppāda) Vibhaṅga Sutta (S 12.2) defines *saṅkhārā* as follows:

And what, bhikshus, are volitional activities (*saṅkhārā*)? Bhikshus, there are these three kinds of volitional activities: the bodily formation, the verbal formation, the mental formation. These are called volitional activities. (S 12.2.14/2:4), SD 5.15

Texts like **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44)⁹⁸ and **the Kāma, bhū Sutta** (S 41.6)⁹⁹ mention a triad of *saṅkhārā* in connection with the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling: bodily formations (*kāya, saṅkhāra*), verbal formations (*vacī, saṅkhāra*) and mental formations (*citta, saṅkhāra*). The first is in-and-out breathing (because breath is dependent on the body); the second, initial application and sustained application (because, by thinking, one forms the ideas one expresses through language); the third,

⁹⁴ I take *āgati, gati* here to mean karmic activities, pace Comy, which refers only to the dying karmic processes.

⁹⁵ S 41.6/4:293 (SA 2:72).

⁹⁶ See **Ariya, pariyesanā S** (M 26.42/1:275) n in SD 1.11 (2003a).

⁹⁷ See S: B 44-47 & 727 n7 (Abhidhamma aspects). See Brahmavainso 2003b:56 f; also see *saṅkhāra* (6) above [1].

⁹⁸ M 44.13-15/1:301.

⁹⁹ S 41.6/4:293.

perception and feeling (because they are dependent on the mind). Two of these—bodily formations and mental formations—are also included in the expanded instructions on the breath meditation.¹⁰⁰

It is interesting here (in the triad of *saṅkhārā*) that bodily formations comprise the breathing process, which is not exactly a conscious process, but an involuntary one. Of course, it is a *conscious* process in the sense that one can *know* or become aware of the process, or one can *volitionally* take longer breaths or shorter ones. Surely, arhats, too, breathe, that is, to say, their bodies need air. This clearly shows that *saṅkhārā* as bodily formations are still present in the Buddha and the arhat.¹⁰¹

8 Saṅkhārā as an aggregate

8.1 TYPES OF VOLITION

8.1.1 Saṅkhāra as volition. *Saṅkhārā* as the fourth aggregate (*khandha*) (Vbh 72, 89) is an activity restricted to the mental realm, and refers to both karma as cause (*cetanā*) and as effect (*phala*), as exemplified by the cooking simile: one prepares the ingredients and cooks them (active), but the cooking takes its own effect (passive). Here, *saṅkhārā* is defined as the 6 classes of volitions (*cha cetanā, kāya*),¹⁰² as in the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta (S 22.56),¹⁰³ that is, volition in terms of each of the 6 sense-objects, thus:

Volition ¹⁰⁴ regarding	forms.
Volition regarding	sounds.
Volition regarding	smells.
Volition regarding	tastes.
Volition regarding	touches.
Volition regarding	mind-objects.

Here, *saṅkhārā* is best technically rendered as “volitional formations.” (In the Abhidhamma, *saṅkhāra-k, khandha* refers to all mental concomitants of consciousness apart from feeling and perception.)¹⁰⁵

8.1.2 Mental factors. According to the Abhidhamma, while the *consciousness* (*viññāṇa*) of the 5 aggregates is the mind (*citta*) itself, *formations* (*saṅkhārā*) are the mental factors (*cetasika*) attending and conditioning the mind as “concomitants.” Hence, the formations may also be called “mental concomitants” or “concomitant factors.”

These **mental factors** (*cetasika*) are directly associated with the arising of consciousness (*viññāṇa* or *citta*). The Abhidhamma of the Pali tradition or Theravāda lists 52 mental factors, of which 25 are either karmically wholesome or neutral, 14 are karmically unwholesome, and 13 are simply neutral. Of these 52 types of mental factors, 7 are invariably associated with all the moment of consciousness, that is, consciousness cannot arise without them. Hence, they are called “universals” (*sabba, citta, sādharmaṇā*, “common to all consciousnesses”).

These universals are (1) sense-contact (*phassa*), (2) feeling (*vedanā*), (3) perception (*saññā*), (4) volition or intention (*cetanā*), (5) one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) or concentration (*samādhi*), (6) vitality (*jīvita*),

¹⁰⁰ See *Ānāpāna, sati S* (M 118.18 f/3:82) = *Eka, dhamma S* (S 54.1/5:311 f). Cf M 1:54, 390; S 2:4, Vbh 135; VbhA 142; Vism 350 f where this triad refers to formations in general.

¹⁰¹ On whether arhats have feelings or not, see SD 17.3(4.2+7). **Sue Hamilton** claims that “The *saṅkhārakkhandha* is unique among the *khandhas* in that it need not, and indeed ultimately should not, be ‘activated’ in the functioning of a human being” (71). [9]

¹⁰² “Classes of volition,” *cetanā, kāya*. “The fact that there is a difference between the name of the aggregate (*saṅkhāra-k, khandha*) and the term of definition (*sañcetanā*) suggests that this aggregate has a wider compass than the others. In the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and the commentaries, the *saṅkhāra-k, khandha* is treated as an ‘umbrella category’ for classifying all mental factors other than feeling and perception. Volition is mentioned only as the most important factor in this aggregate, not as its exclusive constituent.” (S:B 1065 n84). On whether the awakened have feelings, see *Vedanā*, SD 17.3 (7).

¹⁰³ S 22.56/3:58-61 @ SD 3.7.

¹⁰⁴ “Volition,” *sañcetanā*.

¹⁰⁵ See S:B 45.

and (7) attention or advertance of the mind to an object (*manasikāra*). This set of 7 head the list of the 52 factors.¹⁰⁶

8.1.3 Simple terms. I have generally used the term “**formations**” for *saṅkhārā*, unless the context demands a longer expression for the sake of definitiveness. Although here I am unable to find a simpler translation for it, as a rule, it is still better, by way of clarity and beauty to habitually use simple Anglo-Saxon words for Buddhist terms wherever possible.

We should certainly avoid cumbersome, bizarre and exotic terminology. A true understanding of a religion, at least, in the case of Buddhism, is not in the exactness of words used, nor in its technical accuracies, but what they point to, that is, imbibing the spirit of moral virtue and inner calm so that we can wisely tease the spirit from the letter.

In Buddhist training, there is a vital emphasis on not missing the tree for the forest. We have to cut down the forest of words, but not the tree of wisdom (Dh 283). The spirit lies not in the dead words, but in the living transmission and our inner stillness.

8.2 UNCONSCIOUS ACTIONS

8.2.1 The dark side of formations (*saṅkhārā*) is clearly described in **the Sall’atthēna Sutta** (S 36.6). The Sutta opens with the Buddha stating that both the unawakened ordinary person and the awakened saint feel pleasant feeling, painful feeling, and neutral feeling, but there is a difference between the two.¹⁰⁷

7 “Bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

8 Bhikshus, it is just as if they were to wound a person with a dart [arrow],¹⁰⁸ and then they were to wound him with a second dart. As such, bhikshus, that person would feel the sensation of two darts.

Even so, bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

8.2 And being touched by that painful feeling, he shows aversion towards it. When he shows aversion towards the painful feeling, **the latent tendency of aversion** (*paṭighānusaya*) towards painful feeling lies latent in him.

8.3 When touched by a painful feeling, he delights in sensual pleasure.

Why is that so?

Because, bhikshus, the uninstructed ordinary person knows no other escape than through sensual pleasure.¹⁰⁹

8.4 And when he delights in sensual pleasure, **the latent tendency of lust** (*rāgānusaya*) towards pleasant feeling lies latent in him.

8.5 He does not understand according to reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ For the list of 52 mental factors and explanations, see Bodhi et al (ed), *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Kandy, 2nd ed, 1999:78-110.

¹⁰⁷ For further details on **Sall’atthēna S** (S 36.6), see SD 17.3(7.3). On latent tendencies, see SD 17.4(7.3).

¹⁰⁸ Comy: The second wound (*anugata, vedham*) would be just a finger’s breadth or two-fingers’ breadth away from the first one. For the one wounded, as such, would fee; the subsequent worse than the first. (SA 3:76).

¹⁰⁹ Comy: The escape is mental concentration, the path and the fruit, but he does not know this, knowing only sensual pleasure. (SA 3:77).

¹¹⁰ Cf **Cūḷa Sīhanāda S** (M 11.7/1:65), where the Comy says the arising (*samudaya*) the views of being (*bhava, diṭṭhi*) and non-being (*vibhava, diṭṭhi*) are due to any of these eight conditions (*attha-t, thāna*): the 5 aggregates, ignorance, contact, perception, thought, unskillful consideration, evil friends and the voice of another [Pm 1:138]. Their disappearance (*atthaṅgama*) is the path of stream-entry which eradicates all wrong views. Their gratification (*assāda*) may be understood as the satisfaction of psychological need that they provide; their danger (*ādīnava*) is the con-

Not understanding these things according to reality, **the latent tendency of ignorance** (*avijjā'nusaya*) towards neutral feeling lies latent in him.¹¹¹

8.6 If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him.

This, bhikshus, is called an uninstructed ordinary person who is yoked to birth, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair—he is one who is yoked to suffering, I say!¹¹² (S 36.6,7-8/4:208 f), SD 5.5

This important passage shows how karma-formations first operate through the six sense-faculties, reacting to the three kinds of feelings. It should be noted here that such reactions are volitional (in the sense that they are motivated by one's innate unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion) and also conscious (one reacts to them), but *they all can be done unconsciously* (*asampaja*)!

8.2.2 In the Bhūmija Sutta (S 12.25) the Buddha further explains (as in **the Cetanā Sutta 1, S 12.38**)¹¹³ that not all karmic actions are conscious or deliberate, thus:

Ānanda, with ignorance as condition:¹¹⁴

when there is the body,	because of bodily volition,	pleasure and pain arise internally;
or, when there is speech,	because of verbal volition,	pleasure and pain arise internally;
or, when there is mind,	because of mental volition,	pleasure and pain arise internally;

Either by oneself (*sāmañ*), Ānanda, one creates ⟨that bodily volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that verbal volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that mental volitional formation,⟩¹¹⁵ conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally;

or, on account of others (*pare*), one creates ⟨that bodily volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that verbal volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that mental volitional formation,⟩ conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

Either consciously [deliberately] (*sampajāno*), Ānanda, one creates ⟨that bodily volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that verbal volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that mental volitional formation,⟩ conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally;

tinual bondage that they entail; the escape (*nissaraṇa*) from them is nirvana (MA 2:11). See also **Chachakka S** (M 148) where the latent tendencies are explained in connection with each of the 6 senses (M 148.28-33/3:285).

¹¹¹ The most important characteristic of neutral feelings to note is their impermanent nature (It 47). This is because a neutral feeling appears to be the most stable of the three types of feeling. When they are noted as impermanent, it will lead to the arising of wisdom, thereby countering the latent tendency of ignorance. See SD 5.5 §3n. See Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, 2003:171.

¹¹² **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38) concludes with an interesting, broader explanation of how an unawakened person delights all kinds of feelings—whether pleasant, painful or neutral—“he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains clinging to it.” It also describes a Buddha responds to these feelings (M 38.30-41/ 1:266-271). See Intro above & also **Cūḷa,vedalla S** (M 44.25-28/1:303 f).

¹¹³ The Sutta says, “If, monks, one does not intend, and one does not plan, but one is still driven by latent tendencies (*anuseti*)—this is a mental basis that supports consciousness.” (S 12.38/2:65 f), SD 7.6.

¹¹⁴ Comy: This section shows that pleasure and pain do not arise conditioned by contact alone, but with other conditions as well. In this case, the bodily volitions (*kāya,sañcetanā*), verbal volitions (*vaci,sañcetanā*) and mental volitions (*mano,sañcetanā*) are the karmically effective volitions that function as conditions for the resultant pleasure and pain (*vipāka,sukha,dukkha*) (SA 2:57). Bodhi, following Be & Ce, reads *avijjā,paccayā ca* and takes this phrase as belonging to the end of the present para. This has the support of SA, which explains that this is said to show that these volitions are conditioned by ignorance (SA 2:58). PTS reads *va* for *ca*, and places the phrase at the start of the next para. (S:B 561 n77)

¹¹⁵ Here *mano,saṅkhāra*, but, as **Bodhi** notes, from the context, this is clearly syn with *citta,saṅkhāra* in (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.14/2:4), SD 5.15 (see S:B 727 n7). Furthermore, there is no textual justification for identifying the latter with the *citta,saṅkhāra* at (S 41.6/4:293,17) & (M 1:301,28-29), def as *saññā* and *vedanā*. (S:B 561 n79)

or, unconsciously [undeliberately] (*asampajāno*), one creates (that bodily volitional formation,) (that verbal volitional formation,) (that mental volitional formation,) conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.¹¹⁶

Ignorance, Ānanda, pursues these (six) states.¹¹⁷ But, Ānanda, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance,

that body is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,
that speech is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,
that mind is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,¹¹⁸

That field, that site, that base, that foundation, does not exist, conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally.¹¹⁹ (S 12.25,13-19/2:39-41, condensed), SD 31.2¹²⁰

8.2.3 In short, the unawakened mind unwittingly constructs a private world from the flickers and fragments of the past. This virtual reality of ancient shadows in the form of habitual tendencies only grows in obscuring true reality so that we are shielded from liberating self-knowledge. Only in breaking through the shell of this private reality can we truly liberate ourselves.

8.3 READING THE MIND & READING THE WORLD

8.3.1 In the (**Pāṭihāriya**) **Saṅgārava Sutta** (A 3.60), the Buddha explains that the skilled mind-reader is able to know another's mind by fathoming the other person's *mental formations*, here meaning thought-processes, thus:

Furthermore, brahmin, one does not make his declarations by means of a sign, nor after having heard voices of humans, of non-humans, or of devas, nor from having applied and sustained his mind, and then listening to the sound of a person's thought-vibrations¹²¹ but, having attained samadhi that is free from initial application and sustained application, one knows the mind of another with his own, thus:

“By the way the mental formations (*mano,saṅkhāra*) of this good man are inclined, the depth of that mind will think such and such a thought.”¹²²

¹¹⁶ Comy identifies the 3 volitional formations—*kāya,saṅkhāra, vacī,saṅkhāra, mano,saṅkhāra*—with the 3 types of volition just mentioned here. One creates them “by oneself” (*sāmam*) when one acts without being induced by others, with an unprompted mind (*asaṅkhārika,citta*); one creates them “on account of others” (*pare*) when one acts with a prompted mind (*saṅkhārika,citta*). One acts consciously (*sampajāno*) when one acts, knowing karma and its fruit; unconsciously (*asampajāno*), when one acts without such knowledge. (SA 2:58). This text, Bodhi notes, “may be the original basis for the Abhidhamma distinction between *sasaṅkhārika,citta* and *asaṅkhārika,citta*,” on which see Abhs:BRS 1.4. (S:B 561 n78).

¹¹⁷ Be Ce Se: *imesu Ānanda dhammesu avijjā anupatitā*; PTS *imesu Ānanda chasu dhammesu avijjā anupatitā*, where Bodhi thinks *chasu* is redundant (S:B 561 n80). Comy: Ignorance is included among these states under the heading of decisive support (*upanissaya*). For they are all understood under the phrase, “with ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations.” (SA 2:58). On the interpretation of dependent arising by way of the 24 conditional relations of the Paṭṭhāna, see Vism 17: see Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, 1971:159-173.

¹¹⁸ Comy: No such body exists where it would enable pleasure and pain to arise conditioned by bodily volition: the same applies to speech and mind. (Question:) But an arhat acts, speaks and thinks, show how is it that his body, etc, do not exist? (Reply:) In the sense that they do not create karmic results. For the deeds done by an arhat are neither wholesome nor unwholesome karma, but merely functional (*kiriya,matta*); thus, for him, it is said: “that body, etc, do not exist.” (SA 2:58). On the arhat's functional consciousness, see Abhs:BRS 1.15. **Bodhi** says that “an alternative expl might be simply that with the elimination of ignorance there will be no further arising of the five aggregates, the basis of all experience, and thus no further experience of pleasure and pain.” (S:B 749 n81)

¹¹⁹ Comy: There is no *field* (*khetta*) in the sense of a place of growth; no *site* (*vatthu*), in the sense of a support; no *base* (*āyatana*) in the sense of a condition; no *foundation* (*adhikaraṇa*), in the sense of a cause. (SA 2:59)

¹²⁰ This passage also at **Saṅcetana S** (A 4.171/2:157-159).

¹²¹ From here to “thus”: *api ca kho avitakkam avicāram samādhim samāpannassa cetasā ceto paricca pajānāti*.

¹²² *Yathā imassa bhoto mano,saṅkhārā pañhitā imassa cittassa antarā amun,nāma vitakkam vitakkissatī ti*.

And however many such declarations he makes, they are exactly so and not otherwise.
This is called the miracle of mind-reading. (A 3.60.5/1:171) = SD 16.10

Here “samadhi that is free from initial application and sustained application” (*avittakkam avicāram samādhim*) clearly refers to the fourth dhyāna, where psychic powers (such as mind-reading) are the real source of psychic powers, as explained, for example, in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2).¹²³

8.3.2 Here, “mental formations” (*mano,saṅkhāra*) apparently refers to how we “create” our own world, or how we see the world. **The Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), in effect, declares that “all” (*sabba*) that we can know comes through the sense-faculties and the sense-objects. In other words, the only sources of our knowledge are our six senses. This is not to say that the external world does not exist, but that it is merely the four elements, and which in themselves have no moral impact on us.¹²⁴

8.3.3 The cosmos is neutral, but we make sense of the cosmos in a very personal and biased manner. The nature of the world that our senses create is explained in such suttas as **the Lok’anta Gamana Sutta 1** (S 35.116)¹²⁵ and **the (Samuday’atthaṅgama) Loka Sutta** (S 12.44).¹²⁶ In the former Sutta, it is said that while it is not possible to reach the end of the physical universe (it has none), one has to reach “the end” of our sense-fabricated to overcome suffering, which is defined by Ānanda as follows:

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called “the world”¹²⁷ in the noble one’s discipline.¹²⁸

And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world?

The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.¹²⁹

The ear. . . .

The nose. . . .

The tongue. . . .

The body. . . .

The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world in the noble one’s discipline. [96]

Friends, when the Blessed One, after giving an instruction in brief, thus ‘*Monks, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going. Yet, monks, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,*’ without giving the meaning in detail, rose from his seat and entered his dwelling, I understand its meaning in detail to be as follows. (S 35.11.11-12/4:95 f), SD 7.4

8.4 THE “DOER” AND THE “KNOWER”

¹²³ D 2,81-94/1:71-82 @ SD 8.10. On the Comy differing from the text on this point, see **(Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava S** (A 3.60.5(2)/1:171), SD 16.10

¹²⁴ Curiously thinks that “we have no evidence to support the supposition that the world is volitionally formed, only that it is conditioned (*saṅkhata*)” (1996a:79).

¹²⁵ S 35.116/4:93-97 @ SD 7.4.

¹²⁶ S 12.44/2:71-73 = S 7.5.

¹²⁷ See for example **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15) where “the world” refers to the 12 sense-bases.

¹²⁸ *Yena kho āvuso lokasmim loka,saññī hoti lokamānī ayaṃ vuccati ariyassa vinaye loko.* See **Rohitassa S** (S 2.26) in SD 7 & its (2). On the physical sense-bases making one a “perceiver” and the mind-base making one a “conceiver,” see Bodhi’s remark in Intro above. See **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67/4:125-127), SD 15.1.5.

¹²⁹ On the 6 sense-bases as “the world” (*loka*) in the sense of disintegrating, see **Loka S** (S 35.82/4:52 f) in SD 7. See also Bhikkhu Bodhi’s remarks in SD 7.4 Intro.

8.4.1 The key lesson about formations (*saṅkhārā*) is this: one has to let go of the notion that one is really “in charge” of things. This is especially true in meditation: the idea of “taking charge,” of controlling, the meditation, leads to restlessness. This has been called by **Brahmavamso** as the machinations of “the doer,” the old mind that wants to run our lives but actually always ends up making a mess of it.¹³⁰ It takes some wisdom to realize that this “doing” is really a conditioned process. This “doing,” as I understand it, is a simple term for mental formations and volitional formations. Brahmavamso goes on to elaborate:

Even deeper than “the doer” is “the knower.” The two actually go together. One can stop “the doer” for a little while in the jhanas, but later it comes back again. One even can stop “the doer” for aeons by going to the jhana realms after one dies. However, it will still come back again. Once there is a “knower” it will react to what it knows, and it will create “doing.”

“The knower” is usually called consciousness or citta (mind), which is what knows. That knowing is often seen to be the ultimate “self.” Very often people can get the perception, or the paradigm, in their minds of perceiving something in here, which can just know and not be touched by what it knows. It just knows heat and cold, pleasure and pain. It just knows beauty and ugliness. However, at the same time (somehow or other), it can just stand back and not be known, and not be touched by what’s actually happening.

It is important to understand that the nature of consciousness is so fast, so quick, that it gives the illusion of continuity. Owing to this illusion, one misses the point that whatever one sees with your eyes, or feels with the body, the mind then takes that up as its own object, and it knows that it saw. It knows that it felt. It’s that knowing that it saw, knowing that it felt, that gives the illusion of objectivity. It can even know that it knew. (“Anatta (non-self),” 2001; slightly edited)

8.4.2 There is another way we can understand how the “doer” and the “knower” operate. The doer is our past karma in the form of latent tendencies that dictate our present habits and biases.¹³¹ Generally speaking (in a non-technical sense), we can say that the doer is the “conceiver,” while the knower is the “perceiver.” The know actually creates and projects ideas, or filters and distorts sense-experiences, in its own image.¹³²

Although the knower has a negative aspect of reacting to sense-experiences (including “knowing” things), we can tame and discipline it to examine sense-experiences in a more skillful manner, that is, to see impermanence in all such phenomena.

In due course, we begin to fully understand that “all conditioned things are impermanent,” and from there one easily goes on to realize that “all conditioned things are suffering [unsatisfactory].” Then with deep meditation, when the both the doer and the knower are put out of action (at least temporarily), the understanding that “all things are non-self” will arise, followed by liberation.¹³³

8.4.3 In other words, as unawakened beings, we should first tame the doer so that we are not victims of our past nor automatons fuelled and propelled by latent tendencies. This is done through practicing mindfulness of the present moment, especially experiencing it as impermanent. The taming of the knower is more tricky but possible with powerful insight when we begin to see through the shadows and charades of various notions of permanence and selfhood.

¹³⁰ On Brahmavamso’s def of “doer” (and “knower”), see his *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006:40.

¹³¹ Our “biases” (*agatī*, “wrong courses”) are due to desire (*chandaāgati*), hatred (*lobhāāgati*), delusion (*mohāāgati*) or fear (*bhayāāgati*): V 1:339; Sigal’ovāda S (D 31.5/3:182), Saṅgīti S (D 22.1.11(19)/3:228, *agata,gamana*); Agati S 1 (A 4.17/2:18, Saṅgaha Bala S (A 9.5.6d/4:364), SD 2.21; Vism 22.55/683, 22.69/685.

¹³² On the notions of “conceiver” (*mānī*) and “perceiver” (*saññī*), see **Lokanta Gamana S** (S 35.116,13) & SD 7.4 (1.3). See also *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (5).

¹³³ On the doer and the knower in mindfulness training, see Brahmavamso 2006: 19 f, 24, 40 f, 97, 160 f, 208; also SD 15.1(8.5 + 14.6).

8.4.4 Only the knowledge and vision of reality liberate us, only this truth matters, since it is true reality itself: all else is thought and philosophy. **The Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1)¹³⁴ shows why the Buddha disapproves of the various philosophical points, and how we can become what we know, so that what we create the world around us, but a very private and limited one. As **R H Robinson** notes:

The Brahmajāla account reveals why the Gotama is said to have disapproved of the points on which he refused to declare an answer. “The Tathāgata knows that these view-points (*diṭṭhi-ṭhānā*)...will have such and such a result, such and such an effect on the future conditions of those who trust in them” [D:RD 1:40]. Thus the question is not whether these views are true or false, but whether they lead to good or evil rebirth, or to freedom from rebirth. The underlying principle, one often overlooked by modern investigators, is that you become what you know, that what happens in thought affects what happens in existence. (1972b:319)

9 Do arhats have formations?

9.1 Sue Hamilton, in her book, *Identity and Experience*, claims that “The *saṅkhārakkhandha* is unique among the *khandhas* in that it need not, and indeed, ultimately should not, be ‘activated’ in the functioning of a human being” (1996a:71). Hamilton goes on to say that “[t]he technical status of *saṅkhāras* is suggested in passages which state that Nirvana, the cessation of ignorance, is the stilling (or cessation) of *saṅkhāra*,” (1996a:79), quoting the phrase *sabba,saṅkhāra,samatho...nibbānaṃ*.¹³⁵ Further, she notes that “At this point [on attaining nirvana], one’s state of mind is without volitional activity,” quoting the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* from the famous *aneka,jāti,samsāraṃ* verse (the Buddha’s first utterance), recorded at Dh 154, which runs thus:

*Aneka,jāti,samsāraṃ*¹³⁶
sandhāvissam anibbisam
gahakāraṃ gavesanto
dukkhā jāti punappunam

Through many births in samsara
I ran, not finding
the house-maker that I seek:
painful is repeated birth. (Dh 153)

gaha,kāraṃ diṭṭho 'si
puna geham na kahasi
sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā
*gaha,kūṭam visaṅkhitam*¹³⁷
visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ
taṇhānaṃ khayam ajjhagā

You are seen, house-maker!
no more will you build a house:
all your rafters are broken,
the roof-tree destroyed—
the mind is free from constructs,
it has reached the end of craving. (Dh 154)

9.2 The Dhammapada Commentary explains the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* as “Now my mind has won freedom from the conditioned, by making nirvana its object” (*idāni mama cittaṃ visaṅkhāraṃ nibbānaṃ ārammaṇa,karaṇa,vasena gataṃ anupaviṭṭham*, DhA 3:129). It is interesting here that **the Miga,sira Thera,gāthā** (Tha 183cd + 183abc) are identical with Dh 153cd and 154abc, and continues as follows:

thūnirā ca vidālitā
*vimariyādikataṃ*¹³⁸ *cittaṃ*
idh'eva vidhamissatī ti

And the house-top torn apart—
the mind, set free,
will be blown out right here. (Tha 184def)

¹³⁴ See SD 25.

¹³⁵ **Āyācana S** (S 6.1/1:136), SD 12.1; (**Samādhi**) **Ānanda S** (A 3.32/1:133).

¹³⁶ = Tha78ab (**Meṇḍa,sita Tha**).

¹³⁷ **Udāna,varga** 21.7d has *visaṃskṛtam*, which in Pāli would be *visaṅkhatam*, which is vl.

¹³⁸ So Be Se; Ce *vimariyādīkatam*; PTS *vipariyādīkatam*.

We can safely take Tha 184e here as expressing the same idea, since, like Dh 154, it has the same context of spiritual liberation. As such, the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* should not be taken in itself and read as a “state of mind is without volitional activity,” as Hamilton has done. The phrase better understood as “the mind, set free” in both the Dhammapada and Thera, gāthā contexts.

9.3 All this suggests, as it were, that a human being, especially the arhat, can function *without* formations, that he experiences feelings *without formations*, as suggested by Hamilton—but merely saying this is problematic. In fact, **Damien Keown**, in his review of Hamilton’s book rejects her statement,

The suggestion is that a human being (paradigmatically an Arhat) can (and does) function without the involvement of this aggregate, and experiences feelings without any concomitant volitions.... One point which casts doubt on this is that *Theragāthā* 90 [**Sāmidatta Tha**] suggests that in the case of the Arhat all five aggregates remain: “The five aggregates being well understood continue to remain although their roots are cut off.”¹³⁹ Another is that the enlightened (such as the Buddha) experience emotions (such as compassion) which seem to trigger off volitional actions (like teaching the Dharma).” (Keown 1996:304)

The aggregate of formations (*saṅkhāra-k,khandha*) comprises volitions, representing the conative (or volitional) aspect of the mind, most, if not all, of which are rooted in past karma (some good, some bad) and latent tendencies. In an ordinary person, according to **the Kukkura,vatikā Sutta** (M 57), these volitional activities are of two kinds: the afflictive (*sabyapajjha*) and the unafflictive (*abyapajjha*) karma-formations (actions of body, of speech and of mind), which respectively refer to unwholesome karma and to wholesome karma.¹⁴⁰ **The arhat** is above this karmic dichotomy (that is, he is above greed, hate and delusion): he acts spontaneously, out of compassion and with wisdom towards others. In other words, the constructive aspects of formations (plural) do not occur in him. Only the functional karmic formation (singular) arises and ceases as befitting the occasion.

9.4 It should be understood that *saṅkhāra* is a very broad term [9.3], but its most important aspect in an unawakened person is volition,¹⁴¹ or “the will” (for the sake of convenience). Here, the will is simply the “doer” [8.4], who is the true “agent” behind the actor. In other words, as unawakened beings, we do not really have “free will,” but act or not act as our past karma and habitual tendencies dictate.

The arhat (and the non-returned, to some extent), have a stronger “will” (again using the language of convenience). In other words, they have full control of themselves, so that they are not the subject of any karma or habitual tendencies (the arhat has uprooted them all). Using textual language, we can say that arhats (and non-returned, to a great extent) do *not* have any “mental formations” (*mano,saṅhārā*)—note the plural.¹⁴²

They have only “thought-formation” (*citta,saṅkhāro*)—note the singular—since they are still alive and as such have a mind (*citta*) or thinking-process. We might say that they have a *singular* mind, one that is focussed in mindfulness and wisdom, naturally responsive with compassion. This is, in fact, surely one of the senses of **uju,paṭipanna**, “straight in conduct”—he is a *straight* person, so to speak.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ *Pañca-k,khandhā pariññātā tiṭṭhanti china,mūlakā,|vikkhīno jāti,samsāro, n’atthi dāni puna-b,bhavo ti* (Tha 90).

¹⁴⁰ M 57.4-11/1:389-391. These two are often interpreted at the tenfold course of actions (*kamma,patha*): see **Sammā,diṭṭhi S** (M 9.4/1:47), SD 11.14. See also (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56/3:60), SD 3.7 & **Satta-ṭṭhāna S** (S 22.57/3:63 f), SD 29.2, where both explain “formations” [volition] as comprising intentions related to form, sound, smell, taste, touch and mind-object. **The Khajjanīya S** (S 22.79/3:87), SD 17.9 says that formations interacts with each of the other aggregates and conditions them.

¹⁴¹ Sometimes, the term “will” is used here, but this can be problematic, as D Keown remarks, “I for one would agree, that Buddhism has no concept of the ‘will’ at all, certainly not understood in the Augustinian sense as a spiritual faculty independent of sensuous and intellectual life.” (1997:303)

¹⁴² On the important difference btw *saṅkhārā* (pl) and *saṅkhāro* (sg), see **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44.13-15/1:301) & SD 40a.9 (2.4).

¹⁴³ See SD 15.10a (4).

We might then say that an arhat is *a will-free person*, a truly liberated individual. For, “will” entails thinking and planning based on likes and dislikes, something that the arhat, and the non-returned to a great extent, have transcended. The arhat is awakened because he has overcome this most vital aspect of *sañ-khāra*, that of the will or volition as karma. The arhat, in other words, is an “unintentional” person, a spontaneous individual, *who truly goes with the flow, and yet moves against the world’s currents*. **The Parivāmaṣana Sutta** (S 12.51) describes the arhat as follows:

When he neither creates nor forms¹⁴⁴ volitional formation, he does not cling to anything in the world. Not clinging to anything in the world, he is not agitated.¹⁴⁵ Not agitated, he attains nirvana by himself.¹⁴⁶ He understands,

“Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is (for me) no more of arising in any state of being.”¹⁴⁷ (S 12.51.14/2:82), SD 11.5

Thera, gāthā 90, that of the elder Sāmi, datta, runs thus:

<p><i>Pañca-k, khandhā pariññatā tittthanti chinna, mūlakā vikkhīṇo jāti, saṃsāro n’atthi dāni puna-b, bhavo’ti</i></p>	<p>The five aggregates, fully known, <u>stand with roots cut off:</u> the cycle of birth is utterly exhausted, there is no more rebirth here.</p>	<p>(Tha 90)</p>
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¹⁴⁴ “When he neither creates nor forms,” *anabhisankharanto anabhisañcetaṃ*. The word *abhisañcetaṃ* means “he thinks out, plans.”

¹⁴⁵ “He is not agitated,” *na paritassati*. See SD 11.5(§14) for nn.

¹⁴⁶ “By himself,” *paccattam*, ie through his own effort, not through the power of another. (SA 2:78)

¹⁴⁷ This quote is the arhat’s reviewing knowledge (*paccavekkaṇa, ñāṇa*), for which, see S:B I n376.

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